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ABSTRACT

Noting that researchers rarely ask urban fathers about their perspectives and choices regarding fatherhood, this pilot study examined the experiences of urban fathers, focusing on their views of the challenges of fatherhood and how they accounted for both their irresponsible and their promising fathering behaviors; the study's larger goal will be uncovering factors that enable young urban fathers to become involved with their children. Participating in the study were 15 fathers from Indianapolis who were participating in a voluntary fathering program. Data were gathered by means of semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which included questions about barriers to employment and interaction with their children. Fathers had an opportunity to tell stories about their childhoods, relations with their parents, their relationship with the mother(s) of their children, and their activities with their children. Narrative analysis focused on the patterns of voices used to characterize intergenerational learning/relations and transformative events. Findings indicated that most of the fathers reported that they are trying to break out of the intergenerational pattern of father absence, with this effort motivated by some transformative event such as absence of the child or incarceration. They are constructing new or different identities for themselves around fathering, and their own development, education, and sense of responsibility. They struggle to rework their positions with respect to the street, the home, and the system, to make the transition from biological father to committed parent. Fathers represented a typical male developmental progression from the mother's home to the street. The court system was presented as hostile, racist, and irrational. (Contains 14 references.) (KB)

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How Urban Fathers Represent the Transition to Fathering: A Discourse Analysis of Fathering Narratives[1]

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the
American Education Research Association

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**How Urban Fathers Represent the Transition to Fathering:
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The media, researchers, and government agencies have focused increasingly on fatherhood over the past decade and have placed this issue at the forefront of basic and policy research, policymaking, and program development. Although many have attempted to highlight the issues facing all fathers, the majority of public attention has been drawn to those fathers who are called "deadbeat dads"—noncustodial, nonresidential fathers who do not contribute to the financial security of their children. Government agencies have been particularly interested in this population of men because of the perceived "burden" that a failure to support their children is thought to place on society.

Until the passage of the Family Support Act in 1988, the fathers targeted by government agencies were separated and divorced fathers. However, after the passage of the Act, the release of results from two national demonstration projects, and the emergence of pervasive discussions about welfare reform, policymakers began to recognize and acknowledge another group of fathers: low-income, minority fathers and noncustodial, nonresidential fathers who were never married to the mothers of their children. Policymakers assigned particular attention to the issue of child support. Projections of their potential contributions (e.g., Willis & Brien, 1995) demonstrated how little policymakers and researchers themselves knew about the ability of these fathers to pay child support or the degree to which they were able to engage with their children in meaningful relationships.

Since the passage of the Act, attention to and understanding of the significance of fathers' contributions has increased significantly. The definition of those contributions has expanded

from financial support alone to embracing other types of caregiving that fathers can and do make to children's cognitive, social, and emotional health and well-being. Despite a relatively rapid increase in fathering and families research, data on fathers and families representing diverse ethnic, class, and family forms are limited, particularly for low-income, noncustodial, nonresidential fathers whose engagement with their children may be interrupted or adversely affected by poor schooling, lack of employment, low literacy skills, and limited incomes.

Images of these fathers in public discussions, however, are often still limited to references to "deadbeat dads," a term that has become an accepted part of the lexicon. It is surely true that many dads deserve this label, but the resulting stereotypes often discredit all noncustodial, nonresidential fathers. The demonization of deadbeat dads is reflected in the comments of one child advocate, who described deadbeat dads as aggressors in a war that wounds innocent children: "The kids go without proper clothes, food and medical care. But we don't even count them as casualties in this war" (Larson, 1992). It can also be found in popular texts, for example in Louis Rose and Roy Malone's colorful book entitled *Make the Jerk Pay*.

We certainly do not deny that an alarming number of fathers fail to take responsibility for their children. However, this stereotype often becomes misapplied to lower-income fathers in inner-city communities. It may be that fathers' noninvolvement represents less of a choice not to be involved financially or emotionally in their children's lives; rather, the potential for their positive involvement with their children and for their children's achievement may in fact be severely reduced by the constraints of their own situations. While many urban problems arise from intergenerational poverty and family breakdown, which undermine the economic and educational options and opportunities for subsequent generations, many urban fathers are often blamed for a substantial part of their community's problems. We argue that noncustodial,

nonresidential urban fathers are not entirely to blame for their lack of involvement, and certainly not for all their communities' problems. But even if they were, in order to coax them into being better fathers we must understand the situation from their point of view.

Several studies (e.g., Achatz and MacAllum, 1994; Sullivan, Sherwood and Furstenberg, 1992) provide a picture of the social and personal lives of low-income African American urban fathers. These studies generally show that many low-income African American urban fathers do not systematically provide for their children financially, and they provide some information about the economic and social burdens these urban fathers face. But they have not been able to answer why, from the fathers' points of view, do they often fail to provide for their children. Researchers rarely ask urban fathers themselves about their perspectives and choices regarding fatherhood. If we are avoid simply blaming fathers for the problems of childrearing in low-income urban communities, and if we are to help these fathers become more involved in their children's lives, we need to know more about the challenges of urban fathering from the fathers' point of view. To understand how the economic and social challenges they face shape their development as fathers, we need to ask urban fathers themselves how they perceive these challenges. We will not be able to help them become intrinsically motivated fathers simply through extrinsic reinforcement.

This report presents findings from a pilot research study that asked 15 urban fathers in Indianapolis to discuss their experiences as fathers. By allowing these fathers to tell their own stories, we have learned something about how they view the challenges of fathering and how they account for both their irresponsible and their promising fathering behaviors. The fathers in this study do not constitute a random or representative sample of dads in the Indianapolis area; they were all participants in a voluntary fathering program. The most unmotivated fathers would

presumably not have attended the program, and therefore their perspectives are not represented. Despite this limitation, our data do indicate how some relatively motivated urban fathers perceive the challenges of urban fathering and the motivations for their own behavior.

The larger purpose of this study—and subsequent research currently being planned—is to uncover the factors that enable young urban fathers to become involved with their children. We also hope to dispel some of the stereotypes that have been used to characterize an entire population. For this paper, our discussion focuses on more narrow research questions:

- How do urban fathers themselves represent the transition to fatherhood? That is, how do they represent the difference that fathering a child made in the progress of their life, and how do they represent the changes that subsequently occurred as they interacted with their children?

- In particular, how do these urban fathers represent intergenerational relationships in their families? Do they represent their own fathers' behavior as a precursor of their own, or do they try to behave differently than their fathers did?

- In cases where urban fathers represent their own behavior as breaking the cycle of intergenerational father-absence, what transformative events do they think led them to become involved with their children?

The Precarious Position of Urban Fathers: Psychological and Cultural Constraints on Masculinity

Chodorow (1978) argues that virtually all boys undergo a separation from their mothers that is more radical than girls'. On her account, in addition to the need for individuating the self as distinct from the mother—which all children must do—boys must also identify themselves as being different from their mothers with respect to gender identity. This requires further separation from the mother; male gender identity includes various characteristics that are opposed to female ones—for example (in many societies), the injunction against showing pain, fear, and other forms of "weakness." Thus, insofar as Chodorow is correct, all boys must

distance themselves from their mothers, and from the primary nurturing relationship, more than girls do.

In addition to this nearly universal process of male separation from the primary caregiver, many societies also require male rites of passage that reinforce the distance between a male adolescent and his mother. In some societies, these rites of passage often mark the time when a boy stops living with the women in his community, and participating in activities such as childrearing, and moves forever into the world of men (e.g., Herdt, 1982). On the other hand, the rites of passage that females undergo tend not to involve the same separation from female activities such as childrearing. Many religious institutions in our society retain similar rites of passage for boys, although our rituals are generally less elaborate than those found elsewhere. Nonetheless, adolescent boys in the U S. are generally expected to be tough, to deal with emotional issues themselves, and to leave the home and establish their own sphere of activities away from their mothers.

We are arguing that, for biological, psychological, and cultural reasons, by adolescence boys are generally separated from the world of childrearing more than girls. Women have the biological capacity to bear children and to nurse, and around the world they most often serve as children's primary caregivers. Psychologically, girls are not distanced from their mothers in the same way as boys. And culturally, girls are not constructed as "other" in relationship to children's caregiving in the same way as boys are, and they are generally not ritually placed outside the sphere of parenting and childrearing.

We want to emphasize that none of these constraints or tendencies are *necessary* ones. Women can choose to not bear children and to participate in spheres other than the domestic one, and men can choose to engage in childrearing above all other activities. We are *not* making a

normative argument—that women should perform childcare and men should not. We are claiming that biological, psychological, and social factors nonetheless generally reduce the odds that a man will identify himself primarily as a caregiver for children.

These biological, psychological, and sociological factors all operate, to one degree or another, in most places around the world. However, within particular communities local habits and beliefs also influence men's position with respect to childrearing. In urban African American communities, for example, economic and social factors have undercut fathers' ability to support their families and to develop the skills that will enhance their employability and their ability to engage in their children's schooling. A loss of blue-collar jobs in the last third of the twentieth century and chronic poverty have undermined the domestic role of many urban fathers (Wilson, 1997). For many, it has restricted their ability to serve as breadwinners for their families, and made many men rely on their wives and families for economic support. The loss of prestige associated with loss of income, together with many wives' inability to feed both their children and their husbands, has subsequently forced many fathers out of the home (Gadsden, Kane, and Armorer, 1997). In addition, welfare policies sometimes encouraged father absence by withholding benefits from women who lived with their partners.

Recently, researchers such as Anderson (1999) have argued that the experiences of low-income African American men can be explained with a three-part conceptual framework. On this account, urban African American fathers often represent the world within three distinct realms: (1) the street; (2) the home; and (3) the system. The street is a male-dominated context, a realm of self-presentation and sometimes of violence. The home is female-dominated, a realm of childcare and relative safety from the street. The system is white, or at least middle-class, with laws and policies that shortchange and harass lower class urban African Americans.

Although there may be some limitations of the Anderson model, we believe that urban spaces are in some ways analogous to simpler societies that maintain a separation between men's and women's spheres. A full account would of course have to explain in detail the distinctiveness of social roles and spatially segregated realms of activity in inner city neighborhoods. Although some have begun to do this (eg, ...), these divisions are among the least understood aspects of urban life, particularly for poor African American children and families and the educational and social institutions that form their communities.

For the purposes of this discussion, however, we will utilize Anderson's rubric of home, street, and system—because the urban fathers in our study themselves used this three-part distinction (see the next section for data supporting this claim). For men who spend most of their time in the "street" realm, issues of their own schooling and the schooling of their children may become secondary to the daily acts of surviving. A difficult environment for young children, the street does not provide a supportive environment for caring for children—although some fathers did tell us that they interact with their children like peers, in ways partly drawn from the street. Some fathers do try to establish a domestic space for their children in their own places of residence. This is often difficult, however—for economic reasons, or because such a caregiver role does not fit with their identities as men, or because they had not learned the necessary skills to care for children on their own. The system sometimes intervenes, by forcing fathers to support children financially, but it provides few supports for them to sustain their families and achieve self-sufficiency. As a result, these men responded with hostility toward the system, which they believed did little to encourage intrinsically motivated connections between a father and his child.

In low-income, urban African American communities, then, fathers face a difficult situation—race, income, context, and a confluence of misunderstandings about their potential to contribute to children's health, safety, and well-being can conflict with their desire to care for their children. For both universal and society-specific reasons, they cannot easily access the domestic sphere most appropriate for childrearing. How, then, are they to involve themselves and establish themselves as positive forces in their children's lives? This paper draws on the narratives of 15 young urban fathers in Indianapolis, who tell us how they perceive this predicament.

Methodology

The 15 narratives were collected as part of a pilot study conducted in Indianapolis, Indiana. We ran focus groups for urban fathers participating in a local, hospital-based fathering program and for fathers who had either dropped out of the program or had never enrolled. Of the 55 participants in these focus groups, we selected 15 for in-depth interviews. The focus groups and the interviews were conducted by researchers from the University of Pennsylvania, the Erikson Institute, the University of Chicago, the University of California-San Francisco, and by a practitioner from Chicago's Paternal Involvement Project. All interviewers were African American themselves. The semi-structured interview protocol included questions about barriers to employment and interaction with their children. Over the course of these interviews, fathers had a chance to tell stories about their own childhoods, their relations with their parents, their relationships with the mother(s) of their children, their own activities with their children, and their goals both for themselves and their children.

We analyzed the resulting narratives using techniques drawn from Bakhtin (1935/1981) and Wortham (2001; Wortham & Locher, 1996). We focused in particular on the "voicing" that narrators did of important characters in their narratives. That is, we identified linguistic cues that characterize different characters as belonging to or speaking with the "voice" of identifiable social types. Calling someone a "wolf," for instance, in the context of urban environments, may voice that person as predatory and associated with the life of the streets. By identifying the voices of salient characters in this way, we were able to infer how urban fathers characterize and evaluate both themselves (as narrated characters in their stories) and salient others.

After identifying these voices, we focused on the patterns of voices used to characterize two critical themes: (1) intergenerational learning/relations and (2) transformative events. These categories emerged from the data as widespread and central in many of the narratives. Narrators were encouraged to talk about their relations with their own fathers and how that might have influenced their own parenting, because we believe that this is an important process in the reproduction of urban poverty (Gadsden, Pouncy, & Brenner, 1997). The narrators themselves also often referred to transformative events that changed their relationships with their children. Using our techniques for analyzing the voices attributed to major characters in the narratives, we looked for consistent patterns in how the urban fathers represented intergenerational learning/relations and transformative events.

The Fathers' Narratives

Street, Home & System

Our analyses showed that narrators did consistently represent the three realms mentioned above: the street, the home, and the system. Eleven out of fifteen narrators used evaluative terms

to characterize ***the street*** as destructive, dangerous, and unproductive. Activities commonly associated with this realm included "hustlin'," "hangin' out," and "partying." For at least three of the narrators, this lifestyle resulted in their incarceration, and about half of them were involved in illegal activities. A recurring theme was that life on the streets was free and unrestricted, with no responsibilities "holding one down." Several of the fathers associated the street with their youth: "I was still playin'. I was still bein' a boy." For PR, incarceration was a "wake-up call", awakening him to the realization that a street life was inconsistent with fatherhood:

> Yeah. I would have to say that was when I was really, you know, "I have to get a grip." Because even though she was born… Let's see, I was about 19, it wasn't up until 21-22 that I realized, these streets and this party life, you know, I can't, it's not for me anymore. Because I could easily wind up dead or…anything!

Several of the fathers characterized their transition from the street to the home as "slowing down." Street life is "fast" and involves concern primarily for oneself, while domestic life is "slow" and involves significant responsibilities for others.

In describing ***the home***, all narrators represented their mother's home, and often their children's primary home, as protected and nurturing. The domestic realm is an environment characterized by togetherness: i.e., families spending quality time during meals and outings. A large proportion of time in the domestic realm is dedicated to childcare, with parents cooking, cleaning, feeding, as well as playing with their children. The urban fathers in this study characterized the home as starkly different than the streets. For example, whereas the street life involves circumventing responsibility (and the law), in the home fathers accept and fulfill their responsibilities towards their children. Moreover, in the street, young men focus exclusively on

their wants and needs with little incentive to forego enjoyable activities. In the home, fathers relinquish selfish ways in favor of sacrificing for their children. Fathers spoke of putting their children first, as their "number one priority" at home. The domestic realm also offers stability. Many fathers described morning or weekend routines that they engaged in with their children. They oppose this sort of grounded, settled behavior to that associated with the street. EG compares the two realms thus:

> Responsibility. . .that's the number one thing to me. Responsibility because, it's like I watch some of these fathers out there that just hang on the street all day, they'll be wishing they could see their child, but me, on the other hand, that's my number one priority, you know, so. That's my responsibility is to deal with him and make sure he's all right before I go have my fun. That's the number one thing.

EG's response describes three key aspects associated with the home: responsibility, selflessness, and sacrifice. Finally, while the street life is unbounded by external controls, the home life entails subordination to rules of discipline. Narrators spoke of following "the rules of the house" in their own childhood homes, as well as in their interactions with their own children.

Many narrators represented ***the system*** as biased and heartless. For instance, one of the fathers said:

> dealing with the court systems is like being public enemy number one. You know, it's like sometimes they don't care to know the situation; it's just automatically. Sometimes I just think fathers get a bad rap in court. I know I been to court one time....my child support was in arrears. I was working. Instead of just having me maybe pay five more dollars a week, they wanted me to do community service. Which, I was working at the time so I didn't do the community service. They locked me up and charged me $1000 for

> that.... My son's mother was trying to tell them, even she was trying to be on my side and say hey, he's paying his support, he's been... But they didn't want to hear it. Just locked me up, you know.

CJ voices the court system here as heartless and unproductive. They stereotype him, despite the fact that he has started to pay child support, as "public enemy number one." They also act in capricious and unproductive ways. Despite the fact that the system should want him to work and provide child support, they impose community service and lock him up, in ways that jeopardize his ability to do both. So the system is both unjust and ultimately self-defeating.

The Typical Fathering Narrative

In addition to characterizing the three realms of street, home and system consistently in these ways, many of the urban fathers also told a consistent story about how their lives had moved from one realm to another and back. In more than half of the cases, the narrators' own fathers were absent from the home. Those narrators that do speak extensively of their fathers (two-thirds of our sample) most often voice their fathers as part of the street realm. They did not care for the narrators as children, and they lived in a more dangerous, self-oriented world. These narrators were raised by their mothers, in a safer domestic realm. All these narrators represent their mothers positively, as caring and hard-working women, who assumed both parenting roles to compensate for the absentee father.

After reaching adolescence, most of the narrators (73%) followed their fathers by engaging in street life (11 of 15, or 73%). Most sold drugs or engaged in other illegal activity at some point. Almost all fathered their children while still living a street life, although some did

have legal jobs. Many of them (about 50% of those who were on the streets before) continued to live a street life even after their children were born.

In almost all cases, however, the urban fathers report some sort of transformative event that led them to leave the street life and establish a deeper relationship with their children. Sometimes this involved the death of a friend or relative on the street. Sometimes it involved the absence of the child for an extended period, during which they realized that they wanted to be more involved as a father. Three fathers reported that incarceration was the event that transformed their behavior as fathers. After this transformative event, all report that they established some sort of domestic relation with their children, mostly with visitation rights and weekend overnights, together with financial support.

Table 1 represents this common narrative pattern, with the five elements just described, and summarizes how many of the narrators used each of the elements.

Father lived a street life	**Mother raised narrator**	**Narrator lived a street life**	**Transformative event**	**Enters domestic realm**
7 Yes/ 4 No/ 4 No Data	11 Y/ 2 N/ 2 ND	11 Y/ 2 N/ 2 ND	11 Y/ 2 N/ 2 ND	12 Y/ 1 N/ 2 ND

Table 1. Elements of the typical fathering narrative

An Example

To illustrate this pattern, we will describe one narrative in more detail. CJ describes how the more general predicament of low-income African American fathers has played out in his life. He maps the domains of street and home onto his own father and mother, respectively. And he describes how he moved from a child in his mother's home to an adolescent on the street, then

how transformative events have motivated him to break the intergenerational pattern of absent fathers.

When the interviewer asks CJ where he got his image of what a father should do, he answers: "all the years of not having one, wishing that I did....The pain in my life is what made me want to be a father to my child, because I wanted my father, you know. I prayed at night that my father would come. Just knowing the loneliness of not having a father...you don't want your child to go through that same thing." While CJ was home as a child praying for his father to come, his father was living on the street. One of the first times he saw his father, "I happened to run into my father one day. I knew who he was before he knew who I was....I called him Nate, you know. I never, up until I was like 18, I probably seen him three times....He acknowledged me as his son, but I also have other brothers and sisters that I don't know, so it's not like it's just me. It's like a pack of us out there." Besides the clear and painful lack of interest on his father's part, note also CJ's use of the term "pack" to describe his father's children. "Pack" would normally be used to describe a group of animals, like wolves, and so CJ voices his father as like an animal, living on the street and fathering children as an animal would. CJ also says that "I actually have another brother with the same name as me, another brother named CJ, so how that worked [laughs]. So we was all secrets is how I see it." CJ presents his father as out fathering children in secret, as if it's an illicit activity, and even giving some of his children the same name.

Despite his father's absence, CJ "had a pretty good childhood...My mother always did everything she could for me, and my sisters once they came along." His relationship with his mother was and is "still very good. We're very close. A lot of people say we're like brothers and sisters." Unlike many of the other narrators, CJ was fortunate to have a stepfather who

moved into his home when he was 17. Although there was some conflict over discipline, his stepfather helped by "showing me actually how to be a father...and just spending time with me, you know, whether it be showing me different things like fishing and hunting. Just showing me a whole other world than the streets, because at that time I was pretty wild and rowdy. So just knowing there's something out there, not just being on the streets all the time." Although CJ is unusual in having a stepfather who moved into his home and stayed married to his mother, his description of the domestic sphere as a sheltered, "slower" alternative to the "wild and rowdy" streets occurs in most of the narratives.

As CJ says in the last quote, he lived a "street" life before his child was born, and even for several years after. He sold drugs, and he was incarcerated for a couple of months. "I was kinda in the attitude where anything didn't matter, so I was doing things on the street what wasn't, you know, productive and things like that, just hanging out, hustling, trying to make a dollar any way I could." This description captures the carefree, self-centered, "fast" life that most of the narrators describe on the street.

After CJ's son was born, he slowed down a bit. But he maintained his connections to the street life, and then he went back to the street completely when his son moved out of state. "He had moved to Arizona when he got like five years old, and was gone for a year, and that's when my life actually started to speed up. And when he came back from Arizona, which was a year later, my life slowed back down." This absence from his son, plus being incarcerated at the same time, made CJ decide to get involved as a father. "I did like 45 days one time in the lock-up and then I thought about, you know, me. It's actually a little of both. I thought about, you know, me being locked up, which I didn't like, and I never knew my father, and I thought if I spent all my time locked up, then my son would never know his father. So it's actually, I did it half for him

and half for myself." When his son returned from Arizona, CJ acted on the decision he had made in prison. He got a job, established a regular schedule for visitation and overnights, and he became involved in his son's life.

Now he and his son have a good relationship, one which is almost peer-like in some respects. He describes how his son "hangs out with me," and how they "do a variety of things. It just depends on what we wanna do that day." CJ describes their relationship as "pretty open. I could just about talk to him about anything that I want to and I feel like he could do the same with me. 'Cause some things he's shared with me that he doesn't share with his mother so I would say it's pretty open." There are some echoes of the street here, because "hanging out" and "talking to him about anything" could also describe relationships among young men on the street. But CJ also describes himself as taking responsibility and acting more like a parent. "Sometimes I feel like he kinda keeps things back. Like, well I know, I feel like sometimes he just flat out lies to keep himself from getting in trouble. So that bothers us sometimes." Here CJ voices himself, together with his son's mother, as being concerned in a parental way about his son's lying. He also talks about wanting to earn more money, so that he could get his son "the things that I would like him to have, which is not actually the things that he has." Here CJ adopts a more parental voice, as a father able to distinguish what a child actually needs from what he wants to have.

So CJ's father was on the streets, acting more like a self-centered animal than like a father. CJ's mother created a safe home for him, however, and his stepfather later provided a good role model. Nonetheless, as an adolescent and young man CJ ended up on the streets like his father. He lived a "fast" life there, for several years, even after his son was born. But his

son's move to Arizona, while he was in jail, inspired CJ to slow back down and become a responsible parent.

Conclusions

Most of the urban fathers we interviewed, like CJ, report that they are trying to break out of the intergenerational pattern of father absence. They are just at the point of determining how to engage in their children's development and to prepare their children for school. At the same time, they are constructing new or different identities for themselves, not only around fathering but also around their own social development, education, and sense of responsibility. They struggle to rework their positions with respect to the street, the home, and the system, so that they can make the transition from biological father to committed parent.

In their efforts to re-form their identities, the fathers must overcome the biological, psychological, social, and community-specific factors that often separate lower-income urban African American fathers from the domestic realm. In thinking about how the society might help facilitate urban fathers' involvement, we argue that researchers and policymakers must take into account the fathers' own perceptions of the obstacles. We have found that, in this pilot study, fathers represent a regular male developmental progression from the mother's home to the street. Since the street is in many ways opposed to the home, but is in many inner cities the primary alternative to home, fathers are ill-prepared to help in childrearing. The system sometimes intervenes and forces fathers to pay child support. While this is important, these urban fathers present the system as hostile, racist and irrational—such that the system as it is presently structured will not likely inspire intrinsically motivated childcare on the part of urban fathers.

Other institutions have often failed them or have been oppressive, giving them little reason to react positively to the system's intervention (Gadsden and Bowman, 1998).

We also found that, in their narratives at least, most of these fathers are motivated to break the intergenerational cycle of father absence. They report that it takes a transformative event—like the absence of the child, incarceration, or the death of a relative—to inspire their involvement with their children. While one would not want to engineer some of these events, it is worth further study to see whether such events do in fact sometimes inspire fathering and whether society might in some other way encourage the transformation catalyzed by such events.

These data are insufficient grounds upon which to base policy recommendations, but they offer a lens through which we may begin to develop an understanding of the potential role of urban fathers. These are the fathers' accounts, of course, and they may or may not match their actual behavior. One important research question would be to examine whether these narrative representations do in fact match behavior. Even if they do not, however, it is important to know the fathers' own perspectives on their situations. As we argued above, intrinsic change—and when we are talking about caring for children, intrinsic change is the only kind likely to make a substantial difference—must be based in people's own habits and perspectives on the matter. The question that persists is how to enter into a critical analysis of these habits, measure their presence and change, and develop appropriate policies that respond to the needs of fathers, families, and children? With more research on narratives like these, we will be able to explore how such ethnographic accounts complement and extend data from larger studies—studies that provide significant information about whole populations but considerably fewer insights into the more complex attitudes of parents who are struggling to effect positive change for their children.

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